DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 169 490 CS 004 751

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TITLE The Effects of Socioeconomic Differences on First Grade Children's Expectations of and Attitudes toward Reading.
PUB DATE Apr 79
NOTE 29p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Francisco, California, April 8-12, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Beginning Reading; Grade 1; Primary Education; Reading Failure; Reading Instruction; Reading Research; *Self Concept; *Socioeconomic Influences; *Student Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS *Reading Attitudes

ABSTRACT

Thirty-one first grade students from four schools participated in an investigation of the attitudes toward beginning reading held by children from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Two of the schools were in inner-city, predominantly low-income, minority areas; one was in a middle-income area with approximately 27% minority enrollment, and one was in an upper-income area with less than 10% minority enrollment. Each child was interviewed individually three times during the school year. The interview questions focused on the child's own ideas and views with regard to learning to read. The results indicated that the students' self-concepts as readers generally paralleled the variations in economic levels of the school communities. In addition, the children's sense of being able to learn to read by themselves was associated with their self-concepts as readers and with the school economic level. It also appeared that the children's views of the difficulty of learning to read and "fun" of it were not necessarily tied to their feeling of success or competence in reading. (FL)

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The Effects of Socioeconomic Differences on First Grade Children's Expectations of and Attitudes Toward Reading

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, California, April 8-12, 1979.

CS004757

The Effects of Socioeconomic Differences on First Grade Children's Expectations of and Attitudes Toward Reading

Introduction

Compensatory education programs such as Title I have been implemented as a remedy for something known as "educational disadvantage," a condition assumed to relate strongly to or derive from socioeconomic factors. That is, low academic achievement in schools and/or communities has been attributed to economic factors, particularly to concentration of low-income families in a given area. Title I programs have been instituted to provide special assistance in such areas, with the goal of raising student achievement.

Reading failure has been a major manifestation of "educational disadvantage" and has been a primary target of Title I efforts. Inherent in such programs is the presumption that children being served are significantly different from children living and attending school outside the Title I areas.

The research reported here has been designed to explore some of these possible differences. In particular, it is an investigation of the attitudes toward beginning reading held by children from different socioeconomic backgrounds. The central question addressed is: Do first graders from different economic backgrounds begin formal reading instruction with different expectations of learning to read and with different views of themselves as learners?

Methodology

Forty first-grade children from four elementary schools were selected to participate in this study. Schools A and B are inner-city, predominantly low-income and minority schools. School C is in a middle-income area with an approximately 27 percent minority population. School D is in an upper-middle income neighborhood, with less than 10 percent minority enrollment. Additional statistical information about these schools is given in Appendix A.

When this research was begun, Schools A and B each had one first-grade classroom, and ten children from each were randomly selected from among those whose parents gave permission for them to participate in the research. Subsequent to this, School B split the first grade class, placing about 40 percent of the children with another teacher in a combination Grades 1-2 class. School C has three first grades, and ten children were randomly selected from one of these designated by the building principal. In School D, five children were selected randomly from among those receiving parental permission in each of the school's two first-grade classrooms.

Using the protocol described below, the researcher interviewed each child individually during the second week of the school year, again at the end of November, and once again in the middle of February.

The interview protocol was adapted in part from the Print Awareness Tasks of Y. Goodman (1977), and in part from tasks used in this reasearcher's previous work (Tompkins 1978). The focus was on children's own ideas and viewpoints with regard to learning to read.

rather than on achievement or reading ability per se. Of the questions the children were asked, four have been selected for presentation and discussion here. These are:

--Do you know how to read?

--Do you think you could learn to read by yourself?

--Do you think learning to read (will be/is) easy or hard?

--Do you think learning to read (will be/is) fun?

The results of the interviews are presented below in terms of differences among schools in the children's views of themselves as readers and as independent learners, and in their views of learning to read as easy or hard and as fun. Trends from the first to third interviews are noted.

Major limitations of the study are the lack of information about school climate, individual teacher characteristics, and individual student's reading abilities.

Results

A summary of September and February responses given by the 31 subjects remaining in the study is given in Appendix B. These results are presented and discussed below in terms of the four separate questions asked in the interviews, and in terms of some relationships among responses to the questions.

Do you know how to read? The children's answers to this question in September and in February are summarized by school in Tables 1a-1d on the following page. September "yes" and "no" responses are given as row totals, and February "yes" and "no" answers as column totals, such that changes between the two dates appear as upper-right or lower-left cell values.

Tables 1a-1d: Comparison of September and February responses to "Do you know how to read?"

Table 1a. School A

September	February: No	February: Yes	Total
No	7	0	7
Yes	0	0	0
Total	7	0	0

Table 1b. School B

September	February: No	February: Yes	Total
No	3	3	6
Yes	0	1	1
Total	3	4	

Table 1c. School C

September	February: No	February: Yes	Total
No	1	5	6
Yes	1	2	3
Total	2	7	

Table 1d. School D

September	February: No	February: Yes	Total
No	0	0	0
Yes	1	7	8
Total	1	7	

The differences among the four schools in children's self-perceptions as readers were apparent in September, with no children in School A answering "yes," one in School B, three in School C, and eight in School D. By February, the differences among the schools remained, but with notable changes in whether the School B and C children viewed themselves as readers. That is, of the six School C children who characterized themselves an unable to read in September, five said in February that they could read. And, of the six School B children who said they did not know how to read in September, three said they did know how in February.

A problem in interpreting these data is that the School B children's answers were at odds with their demonstrated abilities. In a part of the interview not included in the present analysis, they were asked to dictate stories to the researcher, who simultaneously transcribed them. The child was then asked to look at the transcription and read or tell what was written. Of the four School B children who said they knew how to read in February, none attempted to read the dictated and transcribed story, while two who said they couldn't read did read their stories. In School C, only one child reported that she could read, then did not attempt to read her story. No such discrepancies were noted in Schools A or D.

Do you think you could learn to read to yourself? The four school groups varied from one another in opinions about this. Responses are summarized by school in Tables 2a-2d in the manner described in the previous section. In September, only two of the School A children felt they could learn by themselves, with neither of them still feeling that way by February. The children interviewed in School B were more optimistic both times, with three answering "yes" in September and

again in February. One child answering "no" and one answering "yes" in September reversed their opinions by February. Of the four groups, School C showed the greatest change between September and February, with three children moving from "no" to "yes." In School D, fewer children felt they could learn to read by themselves in February than in September, with two "yes" to "no" reversals.

The two low-income schools, A and B, differed from each other in the children's responses to this item, just as on the first item. The School B children as a group seemed considerably more optimistic, particularly in February, when only one School A child felt she could learn to read by herself, and three didn't know. As noted earlier, the School B optimism may not be warranted by the children's actual reading abilities, but rather may reflect other school or classroom factors.

The School C (middle-income) group changes from "no" to "yes" paralleled the change this same group showed on the previous item. Three children changed their responses to both questions from "no" to "yes" between September and February.

Comparisons of children's February responses to this question with their February responses to "Do you know how to read?" are shown in Tables 3a-3d. There appears to be a general association of self-concept as reader with the belief in ability to learn to read by oneself, regardless of school. Again, there is a contrast between Schools A and B in the number of children who show some optimism about themselves as readers.

Tables 2a-2d: Comparisons of September and February responses to "Do you think you could learn to read by yourself?"

Table 2a. School A

September \ February	Yes	No	Don't Know	Total
Yes	0	1	1	2
No	1	2	0	3
Don't Know	0	0	2	2
Total	1	3	3	

Table 2b. School B

September \ February	Yes	No	Total
Yes	3	1	4
No	1	1	2
Don't Know	0	1	1
Total	4	3	

Table 2c. School C

September \ February	Yes	No	Maybe	Total
Yes	4	1	1	6
No	3	0	0	3
Total	7	1	1	

Table 2d. School D

September \ February	Yes	No	Total
Yes	4	2	6
No	1	0	1
Maybe	0	1	1
Total	5	3	

Do you think learning to read (will be/is) easy or hard?

The children's responses to this question reveal some differences among the school groups, although there is not a clear trend paralleling the trend found in responses to the previous two questions. These responses, with changes between September and February, are summarized in Tables 4a-4d. Four of the seven School A children maintained their original viewpoints on this matter. Of the four who said in February that learning to read was easy, none was actually able to read, and only one expressed the view that she could learn to read by herself. Some change of opinion occurred among the School B children. Of the six who felt learning to read was hard in September, only three still felt this way in February. However, of those who responded "easy" in February, two said they knew how to read and two said they did not.

The School C group showed considerable change in opinion between September and February. Of the five children who said learning to read was hard in September, four said it was easy in February and said they knew how to read. Two children reversed their original "easy" opinions by February, and these were the only two children in the School C sample who said they did not know how to read at that time.

The School D group also showed quite a bit of opinion change from September to February. There was no consistent relation of these changes to the responses given to the two previous questions. Three of the four children who gave "hard" answers in February also said they could read, and two of the four who viewed learning to read as "hard" felt they could learn to read by themselves.

Tables 3a-3d: Comparison of February responses to "Do you know how to read?" and "Do you think you could learn to read by yourself?"

Table 3a. School A

By yourself?

		Yes	No	Don't Know	Total
Do you know how to read?	Yes	0	0	0	0
	No	1	3	3	7
	Total	1	3	3	

Table 3b. School B

By yourself?

		Yes	No	Total
Do you know how to read?	Yes	3	1	4
	No	1	2	3
	Total	4	3	

Table 3c. School C

By yourself?

		Yes	No	Total
Do you know how to read?	Yes	6	1	7
	No	1	1	2
	Total	7	2	

Table 3d. School D

By yourself?

		Yes	No	Total
Do you know how to read?	Yes	5	2	7
	No	0	1	1
	Total	5	3	

Tables 4a-4d: Comparisons of September and February responses to "Do you think learning to read (will be/is) easy or hard?"

Table 4a. School A

		February: Hard	February: Easy	Total
September	Hard	2	1	3
	Easy	1	2	3
	Don't Know	0	1	1
	Total	3	4	

Table 4b. School B

		February: Hard	February: Easy	Total
September	Hard	3	3	6
	Easy	0	1	1
	Total	3	4	

Table 4c. School C

		February: Hard	February: Easy	Total
September	Hard	1	4	5
	Easy	2	1	3
	Don't Know	0	1	1
	Total	3	6	

Table 4d. School D

		February: Hard	February: Easy	February: Both	Total
September	Hard	2	1	1	4
	Easy	2	1	0	3
	Both	0	1	0	1
	Total	4	3	1	

In the sample as a whole, more children tended to view learning to read as "easy" in February than in September. However, only in the School C group did this opinion coincide frequently with the "yes" responses regarding ability to read.

Do you think learning to read is fun? Every child in the sample answered "yes" to this question in February. In September, only four answers other than "yes" were given: one "no," and "a little," one neutral response, and one nonresponse . This unanimity contrasts with the opinions expressed on the other items.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The results presented above indicate that the children's self-concepts as readers generally paralleled the variation in economic levels of the school communities, particularly at the beginning of the year. And, children's sense of being able to learn to read by themselves was associated with their self-concepts as readers, and with the school economic level. When responses to the "easy or hard" and "fun" questions are considered in relation to answers to the first two questions, it appears that the children's views of the difficulty of learning to read and the "fun" of it are not necessarily tied to their feeling of success or competence in reading.

Some exceptions to these general trends are apparent when the response patterns within schools are examined, suggesting the operation of school effects beyond the economic factors. For example, Schools B (low) and C (middle) each included a number of children who said they could not read in September and that they could in February. As noted, however, these responses were more consistent with reality in School C.

At the same time, the School B children responded in a generally more optimistic manner to the first two questions that did the children from the other low-income school, School A. That is, more of the School B children tended to view themselves as able to read and capable of independent learning than the School A children, and showed more of a trend toward positive responses in February.

The changes between September and February in the School C children's responses further suggest the effects of subsequent school experience on the self-concepts and opinions with which children begin first grade. In September, six of nine children said they could not read, and four of these said learning to read was "hard." By February, five of the six said they could read and that they could learn by themselves, and the four who had originally said "hard" now said "easy."

These results also suggest some questions to be considered in planning instruction in compensatory education programs: At the school and classroom level, what factors of climate (see Brookover, et al, 1978) contribute to children's self-concepts as readers, to their view of the reading process, and to achievement? What is the relationship between "success" learning experiences and children's perception of learning as "easy" or hard?" Is there educational value for children in viewing themselves as readers when they may in fact be unable to read?

Until the reading achievement of these children can be measured later on in their school experiences, it is not possible to compare individual children's self-concepts as readers and other opinions about learning to read with their success in this endeavor.

This investigation has revealed certain differences among economic groups during the early part of first grade, particularly in their self-concepts as readers. At the same time, the effects of school experiences on these feelings are apparent from the within-group response patterns. Further research is necessary to clarify the interaction between these early attitudes toward reading and the quality of classroom experience.

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APPENDIX A

Statistical Information regarding the four schools in the study

All four schools were in the same public school system in Tucson, Arizona. Each had grade levels K-6.

	Total Enrollment K-6	Percentage of children from low-income families	Percentage minority enrollment	Percentage identified for Title I	Percentile on third grade statewide reading test, 1978
School A	161	75	92	58	22
School B	198	90	85	60	28
School C	355	23	27	--	50
School D	331	12	9	--	64

APPENDIX B

Summary of Responses to four questions

School A	Do you know how to read?		Do you think you could learn to read by yourself?		Do you think learning to read is easy or hard?		Do you think learning to read is fun?	
	Sept.	Feb.	Sept.	Feb.	Sept.	Feb.	Sept.	Feb.
1	no	no	no	no	hard	hard	yes	yes
2	no	no	don't know	don't know	easy	easy	yes	yes
3	no	no	no	yes	easy	easy	yes	yes
4	no	no	yes	don't know	don't know	easy	---	yes
5	no	no	yes	no	hard	easy	yes	yes
6	no	no	don't know	don't know	hard	hard	yes	yes
7	no	no	no	no	easy	hard	yes	yes

APPENDIX B

Summary of Responses to four questions

	Do you know how to read?		Do you think you could learn to read by yourself?		Do you think learning to read is easy or hard?		Do you think learning to read is fun?	
School B	Sept.	Feb.	Sept.	Feb.	Sept.	Feb.	Sept.	Feb.
1	no	yes*	no	yes	hard	easy	yes	yes
2	no	no	yes	no	hard	easy	yes	yes
3	no	little* bit (yes)	yes	yes	hard	hard	yes	yes
4	no	a little* (yes)	yes	yes	easy	easy	yes	yes
5	no	no*	no	no	hard	hard	no	yes
6	yes	a little* (yes)	don't know	no	hard	hard	yes	yes
7	no	no*	yes	yes	hard	easy	yes	yes

*self-report at odds with performance on story reading task.

APPENDIX B

Summary of Responses to four questions

School C	Do you know how to read?		Do you think you could learn to read by yourself?		Do you think learning to read is easy or hard?		Do you think learning to read is fun?	
	Sept.	Feb.	Sept.	Feb.	Sept.	Feb.	Sept.	Feb.
1	yes	no	yes	yes	easy	hard	yes	yes
2	yes	yes	yes	yes	hard	easy	a little	yes
3	no	yes	no	yes	easy	easy	yes	yes
4	no	no	yes	no	easy	hard	yes	yes
5	no	yes*	no	yes	hard	easy	yes	yes
6	no	a little (yes)	yes	maybe	hard	hard	yes	yes
7	not too much (no)	a little (yes)	yes	yes	hard	easy	yes	yes
8	no	yes	no	yes	hard	easy	yes	yes
9	yes	yes	yes	yes	don't know	easy	yes	yes

*self-report at odds with performance on story reading task

APPENDIX B

Summary of Responses to four questions

School D	Do you know how to read?		Do you think you could learn to read by yourself?		Do you think learning to read is easy or hard?		Do you think learning to read is fun?	
	Sept.	Feb.	Sept.	Feb.	Sept.	Feb.	Sept.	Feb.
1	some (yes)	no	yes	no	easy	hard	yes	yes
2	yes	yes	yes	yes	both	easy	yes	yes
3	learning (yes)	yes	maybe	no	hard	both	neutral	yes
4	yes	yes	yes	no	hard	hard	yes	yes
5	yes	yes	yes	yes	hard	hard	yes	yes
6	yes	yes	yes	yes	easy	easy	yes	yes
7	yes	yes	yes	yes	easy	hard	yes	yes
8	yes	yes	no	yes	hard	easy	yes	yes